

Best Hikes with Kids ColoradoBy Maureen Keilty (*The Mountaineers Books*) \$19.95

From the ghost-like hoodoos of Paint Mines Interpretive Park in the east to the triple 60-foot waterfalls of the Coyote Trail in the west, Keilty has found a hike for the Colorado kid in everyone. Her book gives detailed information for 100 boot-tested trails throughout the state, ranging from easy walks in the foothills of the Front Range to more challenging hikes up majestic 14,000-foot peaks. Great getaways feature nearby campgrounds, additional hikes, and fun outdoor activities. The book includes tips for hiking with children and engaging them with their wilderness surroundings and gives turnaround points for younger children.

Colorado Mountain Passes: The State's Most Accessible High Country RoadwaysBy Rick Spitzer (*Westcliffe Publishers*) \$23.95

This unique guide for Colorado road trips includes: panoramic views from the top of the state's most accessible passes; travel information with maps, directions, and highlights; tips for traveling safely in Colorado's high country; points of interest along the way; ghost towns and mining history; and railroad lines past and present. Beautiful color photographs and sidebars with pertinent

information make this an enjoyable as well as a useful book.

Walking with Dinosaurs: Rediscovering Colorado's Prehistoric BeastsBy Anthony D. Frederick (*Johnson Books*) \$16.95

Did you know that Colorado has more dinosaur fossils and more dinosaur sites than any other state? If you want to literally walk in dinosaur footsteps, Frederick takes you to 11 sites in our state where this is possible. This guidebook features unique insights, wry observations, fascinating information, compelling science, and amusing stories, and includes detailed driving instructions and information on all the sites.

Pike National Forest Colorado: All-Activities GuidebookBy *Outdoor Books & Maps* (*Adler Publishing Co. Inc.*) \$19.95

This comprehensive field guide for all-season activities features 111 Pike National Forest trails. Included are detailed descriptions, trail distances, GPS coordinates, elevation ranges, trail elevation profiles, difficulty ratings and trail access details, plus wilderness areas, campgrounds, and picnic areas.

Guide to Colorado Historic PlacesBy Thomas J. Noel (*Westcliffe Publishers*) \$27.95

Thanks to the Colorado Historical Society, over 600 buildings, sites, and districts all over the state have been restored and preserved for generations to come. This guide directs you to 606 historical sites, including 528 photographs and 165 towns. Complete with the stories behind the sites and their restoration, the author takes you to Colorado's most historic locations and chronicles the efforts to save them.

"'Tis a privilege to live in Colorado." Sadly, the summer wildfires have temporarily damaged some of our natural surroundings, but the majority of our state is intact with breathtaking scenery that beckons visitors and residents alike, especially at this wonderful time of year. Grab a friend or a relative, get outdoors, and savor the beauties of Colorful Colorado.

Until next month, happy reading.

The staff at Covered Treasures Bookstore can be reached at books@ocn.me.

Bird Watch on the Palmer Divide**Blue-gray gnatcatcher: *Poliopitla caerulea***

Above: The dainty blue-gray gnatcatcher has already begun its fall migration. Drawing by Elizabeth Hacker. A color version is posted at www.ocn.me/v12n8bird.htm.

By Elizabeth Hacker

The blue-gray gnatcatcher is one of the smallest songbirds on the Palmer Divide. Because of its speed, delicate song, and diminutive size, it is easy to walk past a flock of them without seeing even one bird.

Description, diet, and habitat

The blue-gray gnatcatcher is found at the edge of pine forests in tall trees or in underbrush like Gamble's oak or elderberry shrubs. Pete Dunne, in his *Field Guide Companion*, describes the blue-gray gnatcatcher as "a tiny sliver of a bird that seems to dance more than forage

through the canopy." This "waltzing twig fairy" is about twice the size of a hummingbird. As its name implies, it is an insectivore that eats gnats and other small insects and spiders.

It is often regarded as a flycatcher but is in a class of its own with 20 species, some of which are called gnatwrens. Similar to a flycatcher, these dainty birds will glean insects in midair, but like a warbler they restlessly scurry along a branch or through dense foliage searching for insects. They move like a warbler but they flick their tails like a wren.

The male gnatcatcher is blue-gray on top from its head to its tail. Females are gray. The under body is white or a light gray. Its long tail is half the length of its body, and the outer tail feathers are white. It has a perfectly round black eye encircled by a white eye ring. The edges of its secondary wings are white, but overall it's a gray little bird. Breeding males may have a small black eyebrow. Gnatcatchers have strong toothpick-thin legs and a narrow sharply pointed beak that are black.

Migration

In April, blue-gray gnatcatchers begin their migration from the subtropical regions of the Gulf of Mexico. They fly north to breed in forested regions across much of North America and Canada. During non-mating season they flock, but in the spring they leave the flock and establish territories. The males arrive here before the females to establish territories and make a buzzing sound when another male intrudes into their territory.

Nesting

When females arrive, pairs form and the male shows his mate possible nesting sites. The female chooses a site and together they gather materials and cooperatively build a tiny cup-shaped nest. Nests are located in the nodes of a branch and camouflaged. The nest is well made from bits of lichens, mosses, and plant fiber and attached to a branch with webbing. Reportedly nests are found near the top of tall trees, but I've only seen them in the lower branches of a Gamble's oak.

Nests contain four or five pea-size eggs, and the male and female take turns sitting on the eggs. The chicks hatch in about 12 days and are featherless and totally dependent on their parents. Parents take turns feeding and tending to the nest for about 15 days until the chicks fledge.

The fledglings stay close to the nest until August, when they join a flock and prepare for migration, which begins in September. Depending on the weather and other environmental factors, gnatcatchers may raise a second brood.

Blue-gray gnatcatchers are feisty little birds that aggressively defend their territories. Both male and female will dive upon intruders, snapping their bills at them. They don't like to share their territory with other birds and will chase off non-predatory birds such as robins as well as predatory birds like the western scrub jay and red-tail hawk.

The importance of birding with an expert

This little bird might have escaped my attention if I hadn't been in the company of two more experienced birders who recognized its distinct buzzing song as we walked the upper loop trail in Castlewood Canyon State Park. The soft buzzing sound escaped my attention until they said "gnatcatcher in the scrub oak about 12 feet up the trail, 2 o'clock, mid to upper branches." When I looked in that location, I noticed movement and was able to focus my binoculars on this busy little bird.

This is an excellent time to find an expert as fall migration is underway. Shorebirds, tanagers, orioles, grosbeaks, and hummingbirds are on the move. Many local, regional, and national birding groups and tour guides offer opportunities to bird with an expert.

Local birding opportunities

Beginning Aug. 16, Ken Pals will offer a class appropriate for anyone interested in birding. It includes three Thursday evening classes at Bear Creek Nature Center and three Saturday morning field trips in various locations. I've taken all of Ken's classes more than once and consider the time and small fee as investments. Pre-registration is required (520-6387).

Other very good field trip opportunities are offered by the Aiken Audubon Society (www.aikenaudubon.com) and Frank Dodge of the Wild Bird Center (548-9863).

Regional birding opportunities

Five state parks are within easy driving distance from the Tri-lakes area: Cheyenne Mountain, Castlewood Canyon, Cherry Creek, Chatfield, and Lake Pueblo. Each of these parks has unique habitats where a variety of unusual birds can be found. Field trips and educational opportunities are listed for each of these parks at the Colorado state park website (www.parks.state.co.us).

National and international birding opportunities

When traveling, I contact the local Audubon Society (www.audubon.com) to ask where the best birding is to be found. Often members offer to guide me through some incredible birding spots.

Many birders travel around the globe to add a bird to their list and often rely on professional tour guides to help them find the bird they seek.

Tom Bush of Front Range Birding Co. in Littleton offers national and statewide birding tours. (www.frontrangebirding.com or 303-979-2473).

Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory (www.rmbo.org) in Fort Collins offers education and a variety of birding trips lead by well-known ornithologists.

The American Birding Association (www.aba.org) is a good resource for information, locating tours, and buying everything a birder could possibly need.

Elizabeth Hacker is a writer and artist. Email her at elizabethhacker@ocn.me to share bird pictures and stories.

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